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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Virginia's campus-based assessment process in the areas of curriculum improvement, academic management, accountability, and reporting. While there is considerable variation among institutions, assessment has demonstrated a moderate to substantial impact on most campuses in the area of curriculum improvement. There is evidence that the process has resulted in the redesign or modification of major programs and a recent trend toward combining assessment with program review. There is a concern, however, that the assessment process used at the management level to make negative decisions (e.g., program elimination) may jeopardize the objectivity with which faculty approach the task. The assessment process, it is argued, must not only address institutional accountability in terms of efficiency but must also contain indicators that reveal improvements in the quality of the outcomes of that education. Only with this double approach can higher education institutions convince the general public of the value of their investment in higher education. Finally, a recommendation is made for changing the assessment process so that assessment reporting would first involve the submission of an assessment activity summary for review, followed by a presentation by appropriate institutional officers during which reactions to the assessment would be given, follow-up information requested, and advice given for program improvement. (GLR)

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Virginia Assessment Group Conference, 11/11/93

THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT REVISITED

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THE PURPOSES OF ASSESSMENT REVISITED

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Now that the third biennial assessment reports have just been reviewed, it may be time to assess assessment in Virginia -- what it does well, what it does not do or do well, and how those things line up with higher education's needs at a time when it is adjusting to a new place in a new scheme of things. The Council itself felt the need for such a review and so asked the staff to do a session on assessment at its fall retreat. Peter Ewell and I led the discussion that day, both of us fresh from the review of the senior institutions' reports.

Peter's conclusion was that campus-based assessment in Virginia has reached its maturity. By this he didn't mean to say that very good and innovative work doesn't lie ahead -- quite the contrary. Some programs in Virginia are, in his view, doing the most cutting-edge work in the country. But programs have pretty much found their niches on campus, their campus-specific natures, and their relative positions in the state. So now state-level focus needs to be less on quality control of and technical assistance to assessment on campus, although we will continue to provide those services, and more on the role mature assessment programs can play as we and the institutions adjust to changing and harsh fiscal realities, as well as changing and sometimes even harsher public perceptions. And the assessment leadership in the state, which is pretty much gathered together in this room, also needs to think about changes in the reporting relationship between the Council and the institutions. I would like to address both of those issues in my remarks today.

I like this tradition of giving a speech on assessment once a year, because it gives me an opportunity to look back over the years, review what I've said before, and see themes developing. The theme that began to emerge in 1990 was "accountability." Assessment in Virginia, I'm sure you remember, was originally conceived to meet the dual goals of improvement and accountability, which, in the late eighties, were seen as complementary goals that could be served by the same mechanisms. Of the two, improvement took priority, which influenced a number of decisions about the shape of the program: the renunciation of state-wide testing for not just campus-specific but program-specific assessment, designed and owned by faculty and structured to make cross-institutional or even cross-program comparisons impossible.

Improvement

So how has the program worked to effect improvement in the curriculum? There is considerable variation among institutions, but generally, on most campuses it seems to have had moderate to substantial impact. That impact has been most direct at the program level, where it has, above all, fostered a new habit of mind. As one department put it, "Because of the faculty's increased involvement in assessment . . . the department is showing increasing signs of seeing the need for studying the major as an overall entity and not simply as a random collection of individual offerings taught by, and under the control of, individual instructors." But assessment has also affected the content of curricula: there are many examples of major programs modified or completely redesigned, honors and remedial programs demonstrably improved. The most recent development is the tendency of departments to combine assessment with program review. This is good insofar as it places assessment in a larger context of evaluation. The danger is that in some cases, direct performance measures disappear in the new, combined process.

Assessment in general education continues to reveal the lack of intellectual coherence in most programs. As one institutional report put it, "The distribution requirements are not organized around a set of pedagogical principles; they are designed to ensure that each relevant department is represented in the requirements." On the other hand, the need to assess the general-education program has led to good conversations and widespread curricular revision. The new conversations about general education on many campuses are a fine example of how thinking in learning-outcomes terms can shift the grounds of discussion from turf to intention. But there is a disturbing pattern of not building assessment into the new programs, so it remains to be seen whether the new curricula will be any more susceptible to assessment than the old ones were.

It may be that we are on the wrong track here, that what we should be looking at is the general maturation of some few fundamental intellectual skills though the undergraduate years. As I mentioned two years ago, we are waiting for a federal test that is being developed for the National Goals Panel. But even if faculty were to administer such a test and find that students on their campus did not show progress in these areas, they would still have the challenge of translating that knowledge into curricular changes that make a difference. We need to be prepared not only to describe our results but to understand by what practices we produce and can improve them.

I am convinced that we cannot give up on this area of the curriculum -- it does, after all, represent at least half of the coursework students do and hence a considerable public investment. And employers and the public, if they have any

dissatisfaction with higher education's product, complain about graduates' general intellectual, rather than their technical, skills -- for instance, that they can't communicate or solve problems well enough. The Big 6 accounting firms' report on accounting education, as one example, says that we are turning out technicians rather than "learning machines." I think we should welcome the public's desire to equate quality in higher education with the fostering of such skills in our graduates, because it constitutes a counter-weight to the tendency to equate quality with the academic preparation of our incoming students or the research reputations of our faculty. But we need to figure out how to nail this piece of jello to the wall.

We had not foreseen that campuses would begin to assess the affective development of students. On many campuses, real attention is being paid to how students experience campus life, in all its elements, and a move is visible to systematically assess student-affairs activities. This is a helpful broadening of attention. I have made the argument with the chief student affairs officers that assessment of their contribution to education in the broadest sense may be necessary to the survival of their part of the enterprise, since many of these programs have suffered serious frostbite in recent years as the blood has rushed to the heart. However, in this area there has been a tendency to rely exclusively on student-satisfaction measures or on counting numbers of students served rather than trying to determine how a given activity contributes to students' education.

Some very exciting work is being done on the border between cognitive and affective development. The reason this is so exciting is that some of the skills that employers are looking for in students involve an affective dimension and may best be learned outside the classroom: e.g., the capacity to work in groups from student clubs and government or the capacity to work in an increasingly diverse workplace through dormitory programs. Even more fundamentally, an acknowledgement of the fact that education happens outside as well as inside the classroom is the first step in moving away from the credit-for-contact model to a system of performance-based credentialling. Some institutions are beginning to pull down the Berlin Wall separating the curriculum and extra-curriculum. A recent initiative at James Madison University suggests the role assessment can play in this process: the assessment office there proposes to assess students' oral communications skills and leave open the question of where they pick up those skills, whether it be in a public speaking class or through the debate team. And the EPISTAR project at Virginia Military Institute suggests another way that boundaries can be crossed: the assessment office provides advisors with an electronic portrait of their advisees, made up of both cognitive and affective measures. They can then intervene appropriately with high-risk students. But these are the cutting edge efforts

in the state -- as yet, most campuses are just entering this realm and are, at best, at the "too much [unconnected] data, too little information" stage described by NCHEMS.

Academic management

Change on a campus can happen at three levels: at the level of the program, the dean, and the provost or president. As I mentioned, we have seen numerous examples of changes at the program level. There are also some institutions where assessment-driven change is happening at the deans' level. At the College of William and Mary, Radford University, and George Mason University, deans of arts and sciences are using assessment data to inform planning, hiring, and resource allocations.

Examples of change initiated by provosts or presidents are rarer. One president in Virginia, in his efforts to restructure the institution to meet the need for more high-quality services for more people at lower cost, has announced his intention of asking programs to justify their existence after five years, and he has said that assessment data will be relevant to the case they make.

We have been warned about using assessment information to make negative decisions, since raising the stakes may jeopardize the objectivity with which faculty approach the task. But it has been my observation that departments that do assessment thoughtfully -- and that are therefore engaged in a process of continuous self-reflection and improvement -- are generally not the weak ones. Having a good assessment process should be one measure of a program's quality. Too, if a unit fails to contribute to the development of students over a period of time during which it has tried to improve, it is important to know that. That is one important data point -- in addition to centrality to mission, duplication, cost, student demand -- that **should** be considered in deciding whether a program should continue or not.

Accountability

As I said, assessment has always had another agenda, usually described, somewhat misleadingly, as "accountability." I say "misleadingly" because, as David Potter said to you two years ago, the Virginia General Assembly's interest did not stem from mistrust in the quality of higher education. "Their tone," he said, "was more on the order of curiosity and competitive pride." "Tell us a story about how higher education is doing," they were saying.

The problem is, incremental, piecemeal change doesn't make much of a story. Departments use assessment to improve what they do, not to describe how well they are educating students. What

results is a crazy quilt, not a narrative of how well programs, much less whole institutions, are doing.

There have been some advantages to this characteristic of Virginia's assessment program, especially in the early years when we were trying to make it as non-threatening as possible. Remember, for instance, the fear that a reporter was going to produce a matrix of assessment results? But it has had its downside as well. First, it threatened to make assessment irrelevant to those who needed to have a bigger picture -- to policy-makers and legislators, who then might wonder why they were funding it, or even to the presidents on your own campuses, who have been tempted to cut assessment when budgets became lean. But for other reasons the need to tell a story about what higher education accomplishes has become more acute.

Originally, David said, the legislature wanted to hear how well Virginia's higher-education system was educating students because of competitive pride -- the question they were really asking was "how are we doing compared to N. Carolina?" Now, the need has become more urgent because of the mood towards higher education that has been kicked up by the bad fiscal situation, a situation that I think we must view as a permanent, structural shift in state budget. Last year Peter Ewell described this as a "fundamental shift in the relationship between higher education and the public," a "new emerging attitude about the role of higher education as a public enterprise."

We are hearing that the public is not willing to raise taxes to increase funding for higher education, largely because we have not been able to tell them clearly what they have gotten in return for their already substantial governmental and individual investment in it. At the macro-level, have we given the nation economic competitiveness? At the micro-level, do we continue to provide students access to the professional classes? Higher education is having increasing difficulty in making those claims. We have not been able to demonstrate how the state and students are better off for their money's having been spent -- much less whether higher education could have served them more cost-effectively.

So, rather than tamper with the assessment system we have that is serving one purpose well and replace it with one which will serve two purposes badly, the Council proposes to develop a set of indicators to supplement the assessment narratives. Which indicators we pick will depend on the audience.

What do parents and students want to know? As the mother of a recent college graduate, I think I know some questions my son would have liked the answers to:

- Will I graduate? The answer to that might lie in graduation

and retention rates, contextualized.

- Will I get a job? Employers might be surveyed: do the students get placed and if so, do they have the skills to do the job, and the job after that, and the job that is changed beyond recognition?

- Will I learn something that will permit me to progress, personally and professionally, in my life? On alumni surveys we might ask, are you happy in your life and work and did your college prepare you for your adult life?

- What will my experience be like? To what degree will I be taught by full-time faculty? How large will my classes be?

- Will my learning add up to anything?

And let me add a parental question to this list:

- Are there any adults in charge? How well does the institution improve what it does by keeping track of what students learn from and think about programs? That is, how well is the institution doing assessment?

The pressure of these questions is going to increase as we pass more of the cost of higher education on to students and parents, since that engenders, as David Potter said two years ago, a "consumerist mentality" in them. Legislators are extremely sensitive to that pressure. In addition, they are likely to focus on what Peter called the "production function" of higher education -- that is, how we will handle increased numbers of students with a permanently smaller fiscal base. The question they would ask in this context is, are we doing things as efficiently and effectively as we could? In order to answer that question, the Council has asked its staff to come up with some efficiency and productivity indicators.

We can already demonstrate that institutions are more efficient than in previous decades, in that the colleges and universities in Virginia are educating 28% more students with 16% more faculty and 3% more support employees than they were in 1980. But that argument is incomplete, if what you want to know is how much **learning** was produced at what cost. We need to bring the two kinds of data together to demonstrate that we are becoming more efficient without a loss of quality and even an improvement in it. Essentially, we need to tell a story about return on society's strategic investment in higher education.

<u>Reporting</u>

The second major question I said I would address today is how the reporting relationship between the Council and the now-

mature assessment programs should change as a result of the maturation of the system. We are looking for reporting procedures that meet your needs to maintain the visibility and importance of assessment on your campuses while reducing the reporting burden to you and the reviewing burden to us. We, like you, have got to work smarter and more efficiently if we are to survive into the brave new century.

What I would like to put before you today is a suggestion developed by an *ad hoc* group of assessment coordinators and faculty who met in Richmond several weeks ago. The aspects of present reporting procedures that they liked were that they keep the pressure on on campus, and that participation in the review process is a good learning experience for assessment coordinators who are reviewers. They liked a common format that permitted them to compare what they are doing to what happens on other campuses. On the other hand, they found the report writing onerous, and some expressed the opinion that the kind of basic questions we ask let the more advanced programs off the hook.

So they ended up recommending an expanded, more open process, involving all assessment coordinators, all provosts, and more faculty. They recommended a process in which we could ask institutions hard questions such as "How do you know your general-education program is making a difference to students," and "How can you use what you've learned from assessment to improve it?"

The group suggested that rather than submitting 75-page assessment reports that are then reviewed by a team and responded to by letter or a summary sheet, each campus would submit a summary of assessment activities and results to a review team made up of assessment coordinators and a provost from another campus. Then, the chief academic officer, the assessment coordinator, and other personnel of each campus would do a public presentation of their institution's assessment program to the review team and other interested bystanders. The presentation would last 45 minutes to an hour and be followed by questions from the team. The team would then, first, give its reactions to the program; second, ask for any follow-up information it needed; and third, provide advice and assistance to the institution about how the program might be strengthened.

If you don't find this suggestion fundamentally flawed, I will take it to the chief academic officers and, presuming a favorable reaction, ask several campuses to pilot test the process next year. After that, we may change the interim reports as well -- perhaps replacing them with a series of regional meetings at which you could respond to each other's programs.

In closing, let me thank you for all the good work you have done in the past year. Dickens referred to the period of the

French Revolution as "the best of times, and the worst of times." I think we all know how it's been the worst of times. But as in any period of major upheaval, these are also the best of times in that they call on the commitment and creativity that many of you have shown yourselves to have in full measure. I honor and thank you for that.